

"COMMAND PERFORMANCES" AND OTHER GREAT SHOWS

During a visit to United States troops in Iceland in the spring of 1941, Colonel R.A. Bolling heard soldiers ask the Army to make sports broadcasts available. Through Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, Chief of the Army Ground Forces, they forwarded their request first to the Morale Service Division, and then to the Radio Division, Bureau of Public Relations in the War Department. Although the Radio Division had no such mandate included in its assigned activities, people there enthusiastically agreed to take on the task. Thus ushered in still another chapter in the extraordinary history of armed forces broadcasting.

Edward Kirby, a civilian broadcaster who'd come to Washington from Tennessee, was the one who tackled the job of developing the idea of "radio to troops." To put together the sports programs, he assembled a production staff that included Robert C. Coleson and Glenn Wheaton. Wheaton had worked for the 1939-40 San Francisco World's Fair Association. He and Louis Cowan, producer of the "Quiz Kids" program, volunteered their services as "dollar a year" men. As time would tell, that was an incredible bargain.

By late spring, the Radio Division was broadcasting to U.S. forces overseas by short wave. Right away, troops began to request musical selections in the same way that commercial disc jockeys received calls for particular records from listeners. So, Kirby's staff decided to develop its own disc jockey-like programs.

To customize the "dj" shows even further, Kirby and his staff got leading band leaders and their singers to cut speaking tracks along with a master of ceremonies who introduced their hit songs. Then they built that dialogue into the music and eventually constructed a half-hour transcription program that'd be broadcast overseas.

Although Glenn Wheaton wrote several prototype scripts, none were produced by December 7, 1941, the "Day of Infamy." To their credit, the Radio Division had expanded its broadcast schedule during the year. It included "News from Home," a weekly hometown news program, "Ringside Seat," a weekly sports roundup and in the Fall, "Football Rebroadcasts."

Following Pearl Harbor, the idea of a musical request show quickly became a reality, albeit in a different format. Wheaton told Coleson on December 8 that he thought the disc jockey idea should be discarded in favor of a live

show. With the United States in the war, Wheaton felt that the military could now get all the talent it wanted for a "Command Performance" broadcast. The staff agreed.

They encouraged the servicemembers to "command the performers to appear," making them feel they had a real connection with the program. From this "command to appear" the program got its name, "Command Performance." Wheaton, generally credited for the coining show's title, received the assignment to create a full production staff and bring the idea to fruition.

Lieutenant Rankin Roberts, a recent arrival to the Radio Bureau, undertook the task of setting up the shortwave broadcast of the program. He and Wheaton went to New York to arrange for the talent and air time. If possible, they'd recruit Vic Knight, the producer of the Fred Allen Show, to become the program producer of "Command Performance."

The impact of Pearl Harbor and the patriotic response of the nation made it easy. Glenn Wheaton assumed the general direction of the writers with the help of Knight, who readily accepted the job of producer for a dollar a year. The only cost to the War Department was for manufacturing transcriptions of the live shows, duplicating them, and shipping them to the short wave stations for broadcast. Wheaton obtained all the talent, additional writers, studio facilities, and air time at no cost!

Under Wheaton's leadership, "Command Performances" took less than three months to get on the air. The first program broadcast on March 1, 1942, in the New York CBS radio theater. The caliber of the show's cast was outstanding, setting the standard for future programs:

Harry Von Zell served as the announcer, Eddie Cantor acted as the master of ceremonies, and the Corky Fairchild Orchestra provided the music. (One of the writers of Eddie Cantor's comedy material, Bob Welch, became the producer of "Command Performance" as an Army corporal after the program moved to Los Angeles.) Bert Gordon added a comic touch as the "Mad Russian" and the Western Union boys sang a birthday telegram. Troops in Iceland requested a sports segment, so the programmers included a recording of the January 9th Joe Lewis-Buddy Bear title fight on the finished transcription.

Engineers made two transcriptions and then duplicated the discs. From the beginning, "Command Performance" was broadcast from transcriptions because of the time zone difference in the locations of the American forces. To protect transcriptions against human error, engineers borrowed the technical procedure from the phonograph recording industry. This became standard operating practice, on occasion preventing an irreplaceable loss of a completed program.

On March 8th, the show was broadcast on eleven

American shortwave stations to troops overseas. Starting with the original eleven stations, Lieutenant Roberts gradually expanded the network. By May 29, 1942, KGEI in San Francisco was beaming the show to the Pacific.

"COMMAND PERFORMANCES" MOVES WEST

Although New York produced the first six "Command Performances," it quickly became obvious that the show should move to the West Coast. First, the troops' overwhelmingly requested more programming starring the Hollywood personalities. Second, the program was quickly exhausting the talent then available in New York. Third, both Wheaton and Knight had their permanent homes in Los Angeles.

Once in the West, Robert Coleson borrowed office space from CBS in their Hollywood building at Sunset and Gower. He also arranged for the use of the network's large audience studio for the recording sessions. For talent, Wheaton and Knight began negotiations with George Rosenberg, the radio director of the Hollywood Victory Committee.

The first West Coast transcription of "Command Performance" occurred on April 12, 1942. It featured Paul Douglas as the announcer, Gene Tierney as the master of ceremonies, Betty Hutton, Gary Cooper, the Andrews Sisters, Ray Noble and his Orchestra, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Ginny Simms, and Bob Burns. Although Rosenberg had not realized that "Command Performance" was to be produced on a regular basis, his commitment increased as the program continued. Ultimately, every notable Hollywood personality appeared on the show, often frequently.

The original production policies for the show, which Edward Kirby had established in New York, remained in effect as long as the Radio Bureau produced the program in Hollywood. The entertainment industry donated the talent, studio facilities, and technical equipment and the War Department paid for the production, just like it'd done in New York. The NBC Recording Division in Hollywood handled the technical processing. The increased distribution network ultimately required the use of vinylite pressings.

During the period that the Radio Bureau produced "Command Performance," Wheaton remained the chief writer. However, shortly after the program moved to Hollywood, Kirby replaced Vic Knight with Maury Holland due to unreasonable demands by Knight and the "increasing sense of his own importance." On one occasion, Knight had demanded the appearance of a singer on "Command Performance" even though she'd already committed to appear at a war bond rally in Boston. Knight had refused to accept Judy Garland as a

replacement, requiring Coleson's intercession.

Later, Cal Kuhl, the top producer of the Hollywood office of J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency, became the third and final producer of "Command Performance" under the Radio Division.

Besides its original purpose of providing entertainment to the troops overseas, "Command Performance" became a vehicle for the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations. So, at the request of the War Department and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), Glenn Wheaton's crew produced Show Number 15 in Cleveland, Ohio, on May 13. He later recalled, the program "was done under well nigh impossible conditions, against our wishes and judgment. We've always thought poorly of that particular show, although apparently it served its purpose of entertaining the NAB, which, of course, was not our primary purpose."

The Radio Division itself, however, was not adverse to using "Command Performance" for its own ends. Wheaton recalls that on August 30, the Division produced the show at the National Theater in Washington, D.C. In doing so, he hoped it would obtain better cooperation, funds, and prestige from the War Department. Stars from one of the Victory Caravans and other entertainers flew in from Hollywood and performed. Kay Kyser flew in his entire orchestra by charter plane to provide the music. Top-ranking government and military officials made up the audience.

The show, which Kirby called "the Big G.I. Broadcast of 1942," saw performances by such notables as Bing Crosby, Larry Adler, Bert Wheeler, Paul Douglas, Ginny Simms, Jimmy Cagney, Hedy Lamarr, Abbott and Costello, and Dinah Shore. It spanned seventy-five minutes of terrific entertainment, giving the production staff enough material for programs 30 and 31 in the series and enough left over to create program 34 with some additional segments from earlier broadcasts.

THE STARS COME OUT: HOPE, CROSBY, BENNY AND MORE

In the pursuit of further recognition, the Bureau of Public Relations planned a special Christmas show that was broadcast domestically over commercial networks and independent stations, shortwaved overseas to the troops, and rebroadcast by the BBC on Christmas Day. The program included Bob Hope as emcee, the Andrews Sisters, Red Skelton, Spike Jones and his Orchestra, Bing Crosby, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Dinah Shore, Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and the 20th Century Fox Orchestra.

Editors transcribed portions of the show in New York and added material recorded in Hollywood. According to Wheaton, this was the only "Command Performance"

the Radio Division produced and released for broadcast in the United States.(1)

On a parallel track, other events within the Army were also shaping the beginning of AFRS and the direction of programs such as "command Performance."

NOTES - CHAPTER 3

(1) This chapter is largely based on an unpublished research paper by Theodore S. DeLay Jr., "An Historical Study of the Radio Series, 'Command Performance,' " written in June 1950. Additional information is presented from an interview with Jack Harris on October 15, 1982.